

Leadership Qualities: Accountability

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Two men were fishing in a stream when they noticed that a nearby bridge was falling apart. Every time a vehicle would drive across it, another piece would fall and the entire bridge would shake dangerously. Finally, after a large truck passed over, the bridge completely fell apart in the middle. The two fishermen knew that if a car came around the bend, the driver would never know that the middle of the bridge was gone; the whole thing could come crashing down, damaging the vehicle and injuring the driver.

One of the men looked at his friend and said, “We’ve got to do something. What would be the ‘Christian’ thing to do?”

His friend thought for a moment and replied, “Build a hospital?”

It does seem that many in Christendom would rather build a hospital than put up a warning sign. We tend to deal with things after the fact instead of taking preventive action. We often allow a person to come to a very bad state before we get involved. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the absence of protective accountability alliances among leaders.

God told the prophet Jeremiah, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure” (Jeremiah 17:9). Our ability to embed ourselves within the impenetrable shell of rationalization, projection and denial is nothing short of amazing. Neil Plantinga writes:

We deny, suppress, or minimize what we know to be true. We assert, adorn, and elevate what we know to be false. We prettify ugly realities and sell ourselves the prettified versions. Thus a liar might transform “I tell a lot of lies to shore up my pride” to “Occasionally, I finesse the truth in order to spare other people’s feelings.”¹

¹ Neil Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 105.

An entire field of social psychology – the study of “cognitive dissonance” – is based on our limitless ability to rationalize what we do and say. That being the case, we all need people who will help us protect ourselves from ourselves and the desires of our own hearts.

Effective leaders use the same standards for themselves that they apply to others. They hold themselves accountable just like everyone else on the team. Maintaining such accountability involves seeking 360-degree honesty. Skilled leaders consistently receive feedback from those who work above them, beside them and for them. David Watson says, “Anything that is subject to human limitation or error requires the collegial presence of another person to ensure responsibility. It is a fact of life.”² A failure to provide a structure for such accountability will lead to a crisis of character and leadership.

An Ounce of Prevention

The tragedy of King David underscores what can happen when leaders fail to create a structure in which they are answerable for how they spend both their private and professional time. Ultimately, as he did with David, God will hold every leader accountable. The Bible shows us the dangers of living our lives free of accountability:

In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king’s men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem.

One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, “Isn’t this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?” Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. (She had purified herself from her uncleanness.) Then she went back home. The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, “I am pregnant.”

2 Samuel 11:1-5

² David Watson, *Covenant Discipleship* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996), p. 17.

By this point in time, David was about 50 years old, had been king for about 20 years, was a gifted musician, mighty warrior and capable leader. He enjoyed an intimate walk with God, a healthy family, a stable political position and an unbroken string of military victories. David was the king who had it all. The one thing he didn't have was Uriah's wife. And that was what he wanted.

One tragic factor that often gets overlooked in this story is that Uriah wasn't just a faceless soldier in David's army. Uriah was one of David's mighty men (cf. 2 Samuel 23:39). This was a man with whom David had a relationship.

Most leaders don't experience a sudden blow-out in their lives. More often it's a slow leak that leads to disaster. Or, to use Derek Kidner's phrase, "We deceive ourselves by the smallness of our surrenders."³ In other words, a man can deceive himself into thinking that a small compromise will not matter. But small steps, taken consistently, add up to a great distance. Small compromise has a snowball effect; momentum develops, and before we realize what's happening, life spins out of control.

David didn't just wake up one morning and decide to trash his life by committing adultery with one of his mighty men's wives and then having that man killed. David had already begun the descent into spiritual sloth by making small compromises. He began by taking an additional wife, then another and another and another. Eventually David had seven wives in all, but even that wasn't enough. So, he stocked a harem. David had a slow leak of self-control. And he compounded that problem by not having anyone around who would tell him about the problem.

Now, while the rest of his army was at war, he stayed at home. Apparently, nobody dared question the wisdom of his hiatus. With nobody to answer to, he broke three of the Ten

³ Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 15. Grand Rapids: Tyndale, 1964.

Commandments by coveting his neighbor's wife and committing the acts of adultery and murder. As the details of David's affair unfold, we can't help but wince. David looks; David wants; David takes; David tries to cover up the consequences; David thinks he's gotten away with it.

But then we come to the most important verse in the chapter, verse 27. There Samuel informs us tersely, "But the thing David had done displeased the Lord." While David could hide his sins from his associates, he couldn't hide them from God. The Bible assures us that our sin will find us out (Numbers 32:23). God sees what is done in secret (Psalm 90:8). Nothing is hidden from him or escapes his notice (Jeremiah 23:24). God may be slow to anger, but God does get angry. One day the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to confront David, and the king discovered that even kings are accountable for their actions.

When David was confronted with his sin, he had two options: Confession or denial. He will either be a man after God's own heart, or he will go the catastrophic way of King Saul. Being a man after God's own heart doesn't mean we are flawless in our performance. Being a godly leader does not require us to practice sinless perfection. It does require us to be honest about our failures. David heard Nathan pronounce judgment from God, and he replied with six short words: "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:13).

It's not long before we find David composing Psalm 51 – a psalm of confession. In this psalm, David pours out his heart to God:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight....You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Psalm 51:1-4a, 16-17

David knew that there was no sacrifice that would cover all these presumptuous sins of murder, covetousness and adultery. David knew there was nothing left to do but to throw himself on the mercy of God. The confrontation of a man of God leads David back into the arms of God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Nothing can be more cruel than the leniency which abandons others to their sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe reprimand which calls another Christian in one’s community back from the path of sin.”⁴

Jonathan had been a friend to David. He provided David with comfort and protection. There was a tremendous bond between these two as young men. Nathan cared enough for David to counsel or rebuke him when it was necessary. Both types of relationships are necessary for us. If David had invited Nathan into his life, perhaps Nathan could have given David advice rather than reprimand. Bonhoeffer continues:

When another Christian falls into obvious sin, an admonition is imperative, because God’s Word demands it. The practice of discipline in the community of faith begins with friends who are close to one another. Words of admonition and reproach must be risked.⁵

If we are not intentional about inviting someone like Nathan into our lives, God will provide a Nathan for us. But by then it may be too late to spare us from the consequences.

Wise leaders don’t wait for a crisis to establish accountability. Accountability relationships cannot be imposed; they must be invited. The onus is on leaders to establish structures and relationships that harness their sin and unleash their potential. We must seek out godly people of mature character and give them permission to ask us the tough questions. This requires risk on our part. It requires honesty and vulnerability – risky things that leaders are

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. Trans. Daniel Bloesch and James Burtness. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 105

⁵ Ibid.

often skittish about. However, as anyone who has suffered the consequences of a fall will tell you, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

God: The Highest Authority

If all humans and angels are accountable to God, to whom or to what is God accountable? Scripture gives an unambiguous answer: to no one and to nothing. There is no higher person or principle that God must consult before doing something. The Apostle Paul writes:

Oh, the depth and the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

“Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?”

“Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Romans 11:33-36

The mind and ways of God are inscrutable and mysterious to us. God’s judgments are unsearchable and his paths beyond our grasp. He does not need to consult with us or explain his ways to us. Instead, it is our responsibility to trust him and submit to his purposes for our lives, even when we haven’t a clue as to where he may be leading us.

God asked Job, “Who has a claim against me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to me” (Job 41:11). No one has counseled God on the proper way to order his creation. God created the world for his own good pleasure, and, contrary to public opinion, life is all about him, not about us. Only when we order things correctly with him at the center are we able to find any semblance of satisfaction. Egocentricity will only lead to disappointment. It’s only when you displace the self by the enthronement of Christ that you discover true liberty and purpose. His service is our perfect freedom.

We were all designed to serve, and we will serve either the creator or the creation. Subhuman, human and angelic life is all derivative; all things are from him, through him and to him. Creation is a cruel and ruthless taskmaster; it will not sustain or provide true security, significance or satisfaction because it cannot.

On the other hand, every knee will bow before God and every tongue will confess to him. “Each of us will give an account of himself to God” (Romans 14:12). If the Scriptures are true, this is an inescapable reality that will impose itself upon us in spite of all human thoughts to the contrary. Wisdom, then, would counsel us to cultivate an ongoing acknowledgement of the brevity of this life (Psalm 90:12) and a growing awareness of the fact that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Honesty: The Key to Accountability

There are many ways in which we can give the appearance of accountability while avoiding its reality. What is the purpose of accountability, and why do people generally try to evade it? How many of us perceive genuine accountability as being in our own best interest, regardless of the degree of inconvenience it may at times entail? The Bible tells us, in 2 Kings 5:20-27, about a man who thought he could avoid accountability.

Naaman, a Syrian army commander, had leprosy. His servant had told him that the prophet Elisha might be able to heal him. So, Naaman makes the trip to see Elisha. The prophet of God tells Naaman what to do in order to be healed, and, as unorthodox as the treatment was, it worked! Naaman is, obviously, overjoyed and offers Elisha gifts, but Elisha refuses them. But Elisha’s servant had another plan:

Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said to himself, “My master was too easy on Naaman, this Aramean, by not accepting from him what he brought. As surely as the Lord lives, I will run after him and get something from him.”

So Gehazi hurried after Naaman. When Naaman saw him running toward him, he got down from the chariot to meet him. “Is everything all right?” he asked.

“Everything is all right,” Gehazi answered. “My master sent me to say, ‘Two young men from the company of the prophets have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim. Please give them a talent of silver and two sets of clothing.’”

“By all means, take two talents,” said Naaman. He urged Gehazi to accept them, and then tied up the two talents of silver in two bags, with two sets of clothing. He gave them to two of his servants, and they carried them ahead of Gehazi. When Gehazi came to the hill, he took the things from the servants and put them away in the house. He sent the men away and they left. Then he went in and stood before his master Elisha.

“Where have you been, Gehazi?” Elisha asked.

“Your servant didn’t go anywhere,” Gehazi asked.

But Elisha said to him, “Was not my spirit with you when the man got down from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to take money, or to accept clothes, olive groves, vineyards, flocks, herds, or menservants and maidservants? Naaman’s leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever.” Then Gehazi went from Elisha’s presence and he was leprous, as white as snow.

Gripped by greed, Elisha’s servant Gehazi lied to Naaman the Syrian and misrepresented his master. When Elisha confronted him, he lied once again, foolishly hoping to veil his deed from the spirit of the prophet. Elisha is not trying to trap his servant; he is trying to set him free.

Throughout Scripture, we find God seeking out sinful people and asking them questions like Elisha’s. He comes to the Garden of Eden and asks, “Adam, where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). Jesus walks with his disciples while they argue over whom among them greatest. He asks them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” (Mark 9:33). Why does God ask these questions? God is omniscient; he is never at a loss for information. God asks these questions to give us the opportunity to be honest.

Because of his refusal to acknowledge the true nature of his desires to Elisha, Gehazi rationalized his disobedience and failed to consider the possible consequences of his actions. Deception never leads to liberation; it leads to subjugation.

Our ability to deceive ourselves is virtually boundless; that is why accountability is so necessary. Without submitting to the counsel of others, we can rationalize almost anything, especially if what we're doing involves a series of small compromises. Thus, accountability is needed not so much to protect us from others, but to protect us from ourselves.

Those who say that they are accountable only to God fail to realize the spheres of human authority that God has established for our good (Hebrews 13:17). Like the centurion who told Jesus, "For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me" (Matthew 8:9), we must recognize our own need to be under the authority of others.

One of the benefits of accountability is that it is consistent with the human condition that makes us more concerned about what others think than about what God thinks. But we need to remember that accountability is only as good as the information upon which it is based. Accountability without full disclosure is a waste of time.

Who Shepherds the Shepherds?

A leader needs to hold his or her followers accountable for their actions. But who holds the leader accountable? His or her peers. Peter was a leader in the early church, but he called his fellow "shepherds of God's flock" to be accountable to one another and to God:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

1 Peter 5:1-4

Peter gave these leaders some necessary counsel. He said, “As you shepherd God’s flock, remember that you, too, have a Shepherd.” The Bible urges accountability. Each person needs other good people with whom they can be honest and accountable (Ephesians 4:25; James 5:16).

As the first member of the Nixon administration to be incarcerated for Watergate-related charges, Chuck Colson learned the need for accountability the hard way. Now, as the founder and chairman of the board of Prison Fellowship ministries, he meets regularly with a small group of men. At their meetings, they ask each other the following seven questions:

1. Have you been with a woman anywhere this past week that might be seen as compromising?
2. Have any of your financial dealings lacked integrity?
3. Have you exposed yourself to any sexually explicit material?
4. Have you spent adequate time in Bible study and prayer?
5. Have you given priority time to your family?
6. Have you fulfilled the mandates of your calling?
7. Have you just lied to me?⁶

Colson says, “We must take care to nurture those forms of social interaction that increase rather than decrease our sense of accountability to one another.”⁷ He knows what he’s talking about.

Peter was certainly known as a leader in the church, but within this group of “shepherds” he was not a boss. He describes himself as a “fellow elder,” placing himself among his peers. These leaders were given a pattern to follow as to how they were to relate and function, and they were called to model this pattern to others. The manner in which they were to exercise their

⁶ Charles Colson, *The Body* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 131.

⁷ Charles Colson, “Cyber Smearing: Revenge on the Net,” *BreakPoint Commentary* #91021, October 21, 1999 (www.pbc.org/cybercolson.html).

leadership was not something they were to decide on their own. They knew that God would ultimately hold them accountable for how well they fulfilled their leadership responsibilities.

No leader is ultimately free from responsibility. And no leader is immune to getting off course. All people are accountable to God, and all people need a group of peers who can help them stay on course until Christ returns.

A Circle of Accountability

Princeton professor Robert Wuthnow has done tremendous research on America's quest for community. He cites this testimony:

I used to be in this group of people who met weekly, and that was a specific circle of friends where we really did help each other out, sharing problems, sharing whatever. Now my friends are more linear. I'm friends with this person and I'm friends with that person, but I don't have a circle of friends who sort of know each other right now.⁸

Wuthnow's comments on this testimony show precisely why we must have a group of peers who assist us reaching our full potential:

The difference is that a circle provides for more internal accountability than a series of linear relationships. If your friends don't know each other, you (even without thinking about it) play up one side of yourself to this friend and a different side to someone else. One friend, for example, can be a confidant on spiritual issues; another can share babysitting but have no spiritual points of intersection at all. When your friends all know each other because they are in the same group, you are more likely to experience the tendency toward personal consistency that fellow believers refer to as *discipleship*. Your friends can compare notes to see if you are treating them all the same. They can decide whether you need advice. For them to all get along with each other, they are likely to agree on certain principles themselves. And this agreement will minimize your chances of being pulled in widely different directions.⁹

⁸ Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 276.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 276-277.

Every person needs a circle of friends to help in reaching his or her full potential. The apostle Paul believed in the “law of the harvest.” He knew that God has established a spiritual law that, like the law of gravity, is inviolable. In Galatians 6:7, he makes it clear that we will reap what we sow. That’s as true for leaders as it is for farmers. If we want to reap a life of personal integrity and purpose, we must cultivate relationships that will keep us on track. Every leader needs to develop a few close friendships with people who will lovingly hold him or her accountable for keeping life focused and balanced.

Businessman Bob Briner discovered the benefits of accountability as he traveled extensively in the process of building the worldwide professional tennis circuit. At one time, the Grand Prix circuit included more than 90 professional events held in cities on every continent.

During one of those years, Briner kept a log that recorded his whereabouts for each day of the year. As December 31 approached, he made some final entries into his log. As he wrote, Briner realized that, while he had visited many of the great capitals of the world and numerous exotic cities, his two favorite places were McPherson, Kansas, and Greenville, Illinois.

Why? Briner explained that those two cities were his favorites because they were home to a few of his key friends whom he needed in order to remain focused on building the kingdom of God – not the kingdom of sports. He suggested that any believer who spends a good deal of time with people who don’t understand – or are antagonistic toward – his or her faith needs relationships built on accountability and caring.¹⁰

In his book *The Man in the Mirror*, Patrick Morley writes an open letter to men and their pastors:

Dear Pastor,

¹⁰ Bob Briner, *Business Basics from the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 53-55.

You know me well. I sit toward the front of the church every Sunday – I’m always there. On the way out, I always greet you with a handshake and a smile. You seem to be glad to see me too.

But you don’t know the “real me” very well. Behind my happy smile is a life that is somehow unbalanced. Occasionally, you have asked me how I’m doing, and I’ve told you, “I’m fine. How are you?” (I’ve learned the easiest way to keep to myself is to refocus the attention back on the other person.)

The truth is, I’m not sure you really want an answer. I know you deal with a real lot of pain and a real lot of suffering: people losing jobs, their homes, their families, loved ones. Frankly, I’m a little embarrassed to talk to you about where I am spiritually. I’m supposed to be on top of things – after all, I’m a successful businessman.

I’ve tried to take a look at my life to examine my ways, but the plain truth is I don’t know how. I really enjoy your sermons. They move my emotions and my spirit, but on Monday morning at 9:00, when the phones start ringing and the customers start complaining, I can’t seem to make the transition. I really need help.

Somehow I sense that my problems are really spiritual problems, but I can’t find spiritual answers. I know that my marriage looks like the picture of success, but behind the closed doors of my private castle, life is very different – I would be ashamed for you to know.

My children don’t seem to like to spend time with me anymore. Frankly, I’ve shut them out of my life for so long, I can’t really blame them. I’ve wasted more nights in empty motel rooms than I care to remember. At first, I thought I was doing it for my family – to provide them a better standard of living. But now I realize that I was really doing it for me – for my own personal self-gratification. Maybe I thought it would make me feel more significant. Anyway, I got the ends and means mixed up, and now I really don’t think that they like me very much anymore.

I know lots of people, but I’m really a very lonely man. I wouldn’t know who to talk to if I could put my frustrations into words. There is no accountability in my life whatsoever. Nobody knows or even seems to care how I’m doing financially, with my business, with my wife, with my children or spiritually. I know you are interested at the group level, but I’m just talking about me – personally, individually. I don’t expect you personally to spend time with me, but I wish we had some way of linking men together to talk about these things. I think it would happen if you really got behind the idea.

Frankly, I’ve done some things in business which I regret. I’ve cut corners and compromised my integrity. I feel guilty about it, but since nobody knows the difference, I just go on pretending everything is okay.

I’m really not much different from anyone else. I often wonder if behind those plastic Sunday-morning smiles, other men might feel the same way I do.

Oh well. I never planned on mailing this letter anyway. But I just had to get some of these things off my chest. I really wish I could tell you about these things. There's so much I want to know, and I need someone to talk to. Oh well. I guess I'll see you on Sunday.

Sincerely,
Frank¹¹

We'll never know how many men compose letters like this one but never send them. Nobody wants to go through life like this. Nobody gets married thinking, "One day my wife and I are going to feel like complete strangers." Nobody starts a new job and wonders, "How long until I begin compromising my ethics?" Nobody wants to "waste more nights in empty motel rooms" than they care to remember. Nobody wants to "go on pretending everything is okay." It just happens. Sometimes it seems life just works out that way. And here's at least one reason why: We don't intentionally seek out people who can and will tell us the truth and ask us the hard questions.

These relationships will not be easy to cultivate. They will require intentionality, time, trust and vulnerability. But the cost/benefit analysis shows that this is one investment leaders cannot afford to pass up.

¹¹ Patrick Morley, *The Man in the Mirror* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), pp. 333-335.